

Innovative Methods

Teaching Family Systems Theory Through Service-Learning

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The authors present a rationale for incorporating service-learning projects into courses that teach family systems theory. A model program is presented to provide an example of the objectives, practical considerations, and student responses to such a project. Recommendations for counselor educators are made based on experience with the model program and student feedback.

The theoretical foundations of family counseling practice lie in family systems theory (Becvar & Becvar, 2000; Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). For family counselor trainees, learning to think systemically represents a radical departure from the traditional linear and intrapsychic epistemologies ingrained in Western cultures (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). Family systems theory moves away from individual psychology to a focus on the interconnectedness of systems and relationships (Becvar & Becvar, 2000). Family counselor trainees, therefore, face the dual challenges of learning to attend to systemic processes while unlearning exclusively individual-focused approaches to counseling. Because of the radical shifts involved in understanding family systems theory, several scholars advocate for the use of experiential exercises in the training of family counselors (Helmeke & Prouty, 2001; Liddle, 1991; Sprenkle & Wilkie, 1996). The purpose of this article is to describe the use of service-learning as an experiential methodology for teaching family systems theory to family counseling students.

Service-learning is a category of experiential learning used to foster practical application of academic training (Jacoby, 2003). We propose that service-learning activities, when integrated into an introductory family counseling course, offer rich opportunities for students to apply family systems theory to real-life situations. Such application helps students experience firsthand the principles of family systems theory while they assimilate theoretical concepts into their conceptual and practical frameworks. The definition of service-learning is the following:

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Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning. (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5)

The remainder of this article (a) describes the rationale for incorporating experiential training into family counseling courses, (b) presents a brief review of research examining the benefits of service-learning, (c) describes a model service-learning project used in an introductory family counseling course, (d) provides examples of other family counseling-related service-learning projects, and (e) outlines practical recommendations for counselor educators who use service-learning activities to enhance students' understanding of family systems theory. Student feedback to the project described herein is presented to highlight potential student responses to service-learning activities.

The Benefits of Experiential Service-Learning

Experiential learning exercises have been incorporated into many family counseling courses (Liddle, 1991; Sprenkle & Wilkie, 1996). Experiential learning exercises help students move from cognitive understanding to affective engagement of theoretical concepts (Sprenkle & Wilkie, 1996). Experience-based methods more closely resemble the practice of family counseling as compared with more traditional forms of course work, such as exams and term papers (Sprenkle & Wilkie, 1996), and can enhance students' understanding of family counseling processes (Helmeke & Prouty, 2001).

Service-learning is an educational pedagogy that is grounded in experiential methodology, especially related to the work of John Dewey (1938). Service-learning involves overlapping clinical experience and education through volunteering (Long, Larsen, Hussey, & Travis, 2001). It is vital to ensure that service-learning provides mutual benefits to students and the community (Jacoby, 1996; Kenny & Gallagher, 2002). Although a need exists for more research examining the effectiveness of service-learning (Howard, 2003), the existing research demonstrates many potential benefits of integrating service with classroom instruction. This section reviews potential student benefits for academic, personal, and professional development.

Research examining academic benefits shows that service-learning can enhance students' understanding of course content (Hamner, 2002; Payne, 2000; Speck, 2001), which can lead to better outcomes for student learning and application of theory and skills (Strage, 2004). Burnett, Hamel, and Long (2004) stated,

Service-learning provides students with a community-centered cooperative learning experience that provides concrete opportunities to learn and apply new skills, think critically, test new roles, contribute meaningfully to the community, build alliances and coalitions, and increase awareness of self-in-relation to others. (pp. 182-183)

Service-learning provides opportunities for intellectual challenges (Enos & Troppe, 1996), educational dialogue between students and faculty (Morton, 1996), and enhanced student motivation (Hamner, 2002; McCarthy, 1996).

Existing research indicates that student reflection is a key ingredient in the development of knowledge through service-learning (Eyler, 2002; McCarthy, 1996). Organizing service-learning around a specific theme further enhances the reflection process (Eyler, 2002). Reflecting on experience also helps students develop connections among course concepts (Primavera, 1999). Service-learning provides students with opportunities to develop solutions to complex problems and to consolidate their learning via the practical application of knowledge (Payne, 2000; Strage, 2004; Valerius & Hamilton, 2001). Overall, service-learning combined with student reflection can enhance students' enthusiasm for learning and academic performance (Eyler, 2002; McKenna & Rizzo, 1999; Payne, 2000).

Some research on service-learning suggests that the benefits of personal growth may be more powerful than the academic benefits (Blieszner & Artale, 2001). Students may experience increased self-esteem, self-confidence, awareness of personal privilege and culture, openness to diverse ideas, and participation in community issues and concerns (Hamner, 2002; Jones & Abes, 2004; Primavera, 1999). Other personal benefits include feelings of personal satisfaction, increased self-knowledge, and appreciation for cultural diversity (Primavera, 1999).

Service-learning experiences may positively affect students' professional development as well. Some basic benefits for professional development include building new skills and interests, having leadership opportunities, learning how to interact with diverse populations, and learning group responsibility (Hamner, 2002). Service-learning can also prepare health care professional trainees for issues related to working in community organizations (Davidson, 2002). Students can use these skills and knowledge to enhance their future professional work.

In light of these benefits, service-learning projects hold many potential benefits for graduate students enrolled in counselor education programs. For example, Burnett et al. (2004) described the use of a service-learning project in a multicultural counseling course in which students participated in culture-focused community projects. On the basis of feedback from students and staff from the involved organizations, these authors concluded that service-learning experiences provide a valuable educational opportunity for counselor education students. In addition, Barbee, Scherer, and Combs (2003) and Woodard and Lin (1999) have described the usefulness of service-learning activities for prepracticum counselor education graduate students.

Service-learning may be useful for teaching family systems theory in family counseling courses. Service-learning projects involve re-

lationship systems (e.g., student-faculty-community partnerships) in which relational dynamics are present (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002), providing an additional systemic level in which students can observe systemic processes. Through service-learning participation, family counseling students can gain understanding of systemic dynamics through both observation of and involvement in these processes.

Model Project: “Hands to Love Camp” in an Introductory Family Counseling Course

This section presents a model service-learning project used in an introductory family counseling course at a large, public, southeastern university. The first author was the instructor for this course, and the second and third authors were students in this course. This section describes the student participants, the project objectives, the host organization, the students’ projects, the strategies used to link the service-learning project to the course content, some of the challenges faced through this project, and student feedback to the project.

Student Participants

The students who participated in the service-learning project were enrolled in a 15-week course titled “Introduction to Family Counseling” in a counselor education program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. The basic content of the course involves an overview of the family life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999) and several major theories of family counseling. Twelve students, all female, were enrolled in the course during the semester of the project. Eleven students provided additional demographic information. The average age of those students was 27.8 years ($SD = 4.8$). Students represented the following ethnic backgrounds: African American ($n = 1$), Asian ($n = 1$), Caucasian ($n = 6$), Hispanic ($n = 1$), Jamaican ($n = 1$), and Puerto Rican ($n = 1$). Two students were majoring in marriage and family counseling, and 9 were majoring in mental health counseling. Students had completed or were completing concurrently the following clinical experiences: a first practicum of 150 hours ($n = 6$), a second practicum of 250 hours ($n = 3$), and a 600-hour internship ($n = 2$).

Service-Learning Project Objectives

As described in the course syllabus, the objectives of the service-learning project for students were (a) to learn through observation of family systems, (b) to practice basic family counseling skills with real families, (c) to learn how stressors and challenges affect families, and (d) to offer their skills and expertise to support the children and families involved with the host organization. The assignment constituted 18% of students’ overall course grade.

Service-Learning Site: Hands to Love Camp

This section describes the organization, Hands to Love Camp (2006), selected to be the beneficiary of the service-learning project. Hands to Love is a weekend-long camp for families of children who have congenital hand abnormalities, also referred to as upper limb differences. An orthopedic surgeon established Hands to Love Camp in 2001 to provide supportive, therapeutic activities for these families. Approximately 20 to 30 families attend camp each year. In addition to activities such as golf, a ropes course, and crafts, the camp offers educational opportunities with occupational therapists, recreation therapists, physicians, and family counselors. The camp's mission statement is "bringing together children with congenital hand differences and their families to create a safe haven in which these families can try new activities, share experiences and develop a support network" (Hands to Love Camp, 2006, Welcome section, para. 1).

The following characteristics rendered Hands to Love Camp an appropriate service-learning site for this introductory family counseling course. These characteristics can be used as criteria for selecting sites for future service-learning programs.

The whole family was involved. The camp directors recognize that the entire family is affected by a child's limb difference. Activities are available for parents, siblings, and the campers themselves. A major emphasis of this year's camp was fostering healthy family relationships, which was reflected in the camp theme "We Are Family."

The influence of multiple systemic levels was observable. Systems theory holds that systems exist at multiple levels, and each level of the system affects the other levels (Brody & Sobel, 1979). At this camp, an observable reciprocal influence exists among a physical health condition, individual psychology, family relationships, and larger interfamily group processes.

The camp occurred within a limited time period. Time demands are perhaps the major drawback for students involved in service-learning projects (Blieszner & Artale, 2001; Hamner, 2002). This may be especially true for counseling graduate students, many of whom balance school, practicum or internship experiences, work, and/or family relationships. Therefore, the single-weekend camp was appropriate for busy graduate students.

The project met an identified need for the organization. The camp directors identified a goal to expand the number and range of family support activities at camp at the time of the service-learning project. In addition, each student project addressed a specific need of the families who attended camp. Therefore, students had an opportunity to provide needed services and to have a lasting impact on the organization.

The camp organizers were supportive, enthusiastic, and flexible regarding students' participation in the project. Service-learning projects should be mutually beneficial for students, the community organization, and the faculty involved (Hamner, 2002; Jacoby,

1996; Kenny & Gallagher, 2002). Camp organizers worked with the students to provide them with opportunities that were engaging and educational. Organizers also provided students with flexibility to design projects that reflected their diverse interests and experience.

Student Projects

All of the students' projects were based on a central goal of providing opportunities for the involved families to increase their capacity for healthy, supportive relationships. Student projects focused on therapeutic, facilitative activities. On the 1st day of class, students collaborated in brainstorming to develop a list of project ideas and family needs to address. Over the next two class periods, students were divided into groups and selected their initial project ideas. Students were encouraged to develop a project relating to a topic and format of interest to them.

Working in pairs, each group developed a unique project to contribute to the camp. A total of six projects were implemented by course students. First, one group conducted a process group for siblings to discuss their feelings and role in the family system. This process group involved an interactive discussion of the siblings' responses to their family relationships and a related art project. The second group led a sleepover for adolescent girls involving activities to address their unique developmental needs. The students involved in this project developed a series of activities and discussion topics that would be relevant to this age group (e.g., family and dating relationships). The third group organized a family fashion show that showcased a unique interest or characteristic of each family. The purpose of the fashion show was to demonstrate the special qualities of each family. Prior to the camp, students sent a brief letter to the families requesting that they bring costumes or outfits that represented one of their unique characteristics or interests. With students as emcees, this event provided a celebration of the families involved in camp.

The fourth group coordinated a scavenger hunt incorporating family communication exercises. Families who participated in this event were provided with a list of items they needed to collect or stations they needed to visit in order to complete the scavenger hunt. At each station, families were required to complete a communication-focused task in order to receive evidence (i.e., a sticker) that they had visited the site. For example, at one station, each family member was required to say one positive statement about other family members. The fifth group led movement and dance therapeutic activities for the campers to address body image and creativity. This project involved a series of physical activities—primarily based on music—that were intended to foster the physical expression of the campers. One of these activities involved asking each camper to perform a physical movement that represented him or her. Finally, the sixth group developed a psychoeducational group for parents on the topic of emotional management. The primary

activity involved in this group was a “feelings jar” in which parents in the group were asked to write on a piece of paper one positive and one negative emotion they experienced in relation to their child’s upper limb difference. These feelings were placed in a jar, and parents took turns pulling out one of the feelings and sharing examples of times they had experienced that emotion. The wide range of activities allowed students to work on projects of interest to them and broadened the spectrum of opportunities available for the campers. In addition to these formal projects, students were encouraged (but not required) to spend extra time at camp observing and interacting informally with the families at camp.

Strategies Used to Link the Service-Learning Project With Course Content

Service-learning projects should be integrated with other course activities to maximize students’ learning (Enos & Troppe, 1996; Valerius & Hamilton, 2001). The following strategies were used to connect the camp experience to course content. First, class time was devoted to discussing students’ projects. The instructor (first author) consulted with each group to clarify students’ ideas and prepare for project implementation. This class time emphasized the importance of the project as a learning experience that fit within the larger course goals.

Second, a camp director (who is an occupational therapist) visited the class as a guest speaker to inform students about some common challenges, experiences, and strengths of the camp families. The camp director described to students some of her observations about how family members often respond emotionally and relationally to significant events, such as learning of the child’s upper limb difference, attending the child’s surgeries, and dealing with teasing that some of these children experience in school. This presentation provided students with examples of the systemic context surrounding each child’s limb difference. During her visit, the camp director also worked with students to further develop their ideas about their projects.

Third, a class discussion focused on the consistencies between students’ projects and family systems theory. Each student articulated the systemic context and rationale for her group’s project. In particular, class discussions focused on the manner in which every family member is affected by the experiences of one family member (i.e., the upper limb difference), as well as the impact of the larger systemic context (e.g., health care settings and culture) on family relationships. Throughout the semester, the instructor used examples of the dynamics that may be present within the families who attend Hands to Love Camp in order to illustrate the concepts of the various systemic theories discussed in class.

Fourth, a hypothetical camp family was used in a case study and role play in class during the lesson on multisystemic family therapy, which encouraged students to consider practical strate-

gies when working with similar families. Through this exercise, students considered such practical issues as how to include other community helpers (e.g., a hospital social worker) in the treatment of the family and the language to use when discussing a child's upper limb difference.

Fifth, time was devoted to student reflection and discussion in the class period following the camp weekend. At this time, students discussed their reactions, observations, and knowledge gained from the project. Finally, the student feedback form asked students to consider the influence the service-learning project had on their understanding of family systems theory and their perceived competence in the practice of family counseling.

Challenges Faced Throughout This Project

Although this project was generally a positive experience for the instructor, students, camp staff, and families, three challenges arose during the course of the project. One challenge that arose involved coordinating the schedules of the students, because each of the projects occurred at a different time during the weekend. Therefore, it was necessary for the instructor to work closely with students and camp staff members to ensure that all parties were informed of the schedule of events and that all students knew the correct time and location of their project. A second challenge that arose was promoting sufficient motivation in students to be willing to devote adequate time and energy to developing a carefully planned project. To help meet this challenge, the instructor showed a video about camp on the first day of class, provided students with the flexibility to be creative with their projects, and encouraged the camp director, who came to class as a guest speaker, to share openly her enthusiasm for Hands to Love Camp. A third challenge that arose during the camp was the additional amount of time required of the instructor to coordinate the project. In order to manage the demands on her time, the instructor delegated responsibilities appropriately and devoted a period of time each week to the project.

Project Evaluation: Student Feedback to the Service-Learning Project

Student feedback is important for improving service-learning projects (Valerius & Hamilton, 2001). In the course period following the camp weekend, students completed an optional qualitative feedback form soliciting their opinions about the usefulness of the project for learning and suggestions for improving the project. Eleven students completed this form. The students' feedback is summarized in this section to highlight the student participants' responses to this activity. Responses were compiled by the third author, a student in the course, and were anonymous to the first author, the instructor. This effort was taken to maximize the integrity of students' responses. The first and third authors independently

coded the responses into themes, and the themes were compared for consistency. Consistent themes are described in this section.

Primary themes included new appreciation for the impact of the systemic context on families, the interactional dynamics within families, and the resilience of families who face adversity and challenge, as well as the advantages of practical application of knowledge through participation in a helping activity. Quotations from students' feedback forms are included in this section to illustrate these themes.

Systems theory came to life as students observed families' interpersonal dynamics in a recreational context. As one student stated, "Working with multiple layers of the system . . . acknowledges the complexity of the family's stressors and takes the sole focus off of the camper [identified patient]." Students viewed how different family members provided direction, support, or comic relief to other members, as well as the strategies family members used to communicate about practical issues such as participation in a play activity. Another student observed that "each part with which we work will effect some change in the whole when that family is reintroduced into its natural environment."

As students viewed families in a nonclinical context, they noted that families negotiated power, structure, and outside systems in unique, adaptive ways. One student gained perspective on "how the family as a whole and its individuals deal with differences both within the family system and with greater society." By interacting with families through therapeutic activities, students became more aware that "family dynamics are always different" and recognized "the importance of naturalistic observation of systems." Hands-on planning and implementation of therapeutic experiential exercises afforded students an opportunity to observe family dynamics in a natural context.

Many students had limited prior experience in family counseling. Interactions with the parents at camp underscored students' appreciation for the universal issues that all parents face and the unique challenges that parents of children with special needs encounter. Students examined how families respond to these challenges. They "learned that these children and their families have a great deal of strength," "saw how important each member's emotional support was to one another," and appreciated "the overall resiliency of the children and their families . . . you can't learn this in a book." Students also witnessed how families cope in positive and negative ways with adversity.

Students welcomed the creativity that the service-learning project required. The project encouraged students to view counseling as a dynamic, active series of interventions and inspirations rather than just "talk therapy." One student remarked that participation with families in the camp environment "reinforced the fact that I learn and demonstrate competence by *doing*." Not only were the activities "a great way to apply theory," but they "educationally added

some practical experience outside of the classroom.” Furthermore, most students reported increased confidence with family work. Only one student indicated that the camp experience had a minimal influence on her competence, stating, “I didn’t deal with the families enough to become more competent.” Another student exemplified a common sentiment of other students when she said, “Service-learning projects such as Hand Camp provide students with a rich opportunity to apply theory and engage oneself on a cognitive, emotional, and spiritual level.” Service-learning takes family counseling students outside the classroom and into the world to explore how the application of family systems theory can enrich the lives of both clients and practitioners.

Additional Examples of Family Counseling Course Service-Learning Projects

Although the Hands to Love project provides an illustrative model of a service-learning project used in a family counseling course, this project was unique to the geographic location and resources of the host university. Therefore, additional examples of service-learning projects used in courses taught by the first author may provide further clarification of the types of projects that may be practical and appropriate for graduate-level courses in counselor education.

The first author included a service-learning project in an advanced family counseling course on family violence. For this assignment, students were required to develop and implement an interactive psychoeducational group workshop related to the topic of family violence prevention to deliver in the community settings of their choice. Students worked either independently or in pairs for this project. Students conducted their workshops in the following settings: an adolescent residential treatment center, a faith-based counseling center, and a battered women’s shelter. The topics addressed in these settings included date rape prevention, domestic violence within religious organizations, and emotional abuse. The first author attended each of these workshops and was available to provide immediate feedback to her students. Regarding this project, one student wrote,

I’ll admit when I first read over the syllabus and saw the service-learning portion of the class, I groaned inwardly. I worried that it was going to be difficult to schedule and overly time-intensive. It turned out to be neither of these things. I co-led a psychoeducational group on acquaintance rape in an adolescent group home for my service-learning experience and it was a wonderful integration of theory and practice. My partner and I researched the issue, developed a group format that was part educational and part discussion, and created informational handouts for all group participants. This process of researching, organizing, and implementing our knowledge helped reinforce the theoretical information we gained in class and then took it a step farther than most classes by requiring us to actually get into the community and use our knowledge. This ensured that we had not only a theoretical understanding of the material, but also started us on the path of actually implementing our knowledge.

The first author has also included two service-learning projects in the current semester of her introductory family counseling course, with half of the students enrolled in the course participating in each of the projects. Both of these projects involve working with immigrant families within the local community. The first project is conducted through an organization that provides supportive services (e.g., employment services, case management, and assistance with cultural adjustment) to African refugees and immigrants living in the local community. Students are working in pairs as “family partners” with an African family. This involves meeting regularly throughout the semester with the family to help them reach a mutually established short-term goal (e.g., developing parenting skills or managing stress) and providing support to the family as they make the transition to living in the local community.

The second current project is conducted through a local apartment complex that houses refugee and immigrant families from Africa, Mexico, South America, and Asia. Students who signed up for this project are assisting with a family festival held annually at the apartment complex. At the festival, each student will be matched up with at least one family. Students will be working with families at the festival to construct picnic tables, which will be kept at their apartment (with the goal of enhancing family life and community connections within the complex). Students will have the opportunity to work with the families on problem-solving and communication skills during this project, with the other benefit of having an opportunity to observe family processes during challenging situations. Because both of these projects are currently ongoing, student feedback is not yet available.

Each service-learning project is likely to differ based on local needs, resources, and organizations. Counselor educators can work to build partnerships within their local communities in order to develop appropriate service-learning projects for their students. In addition, local volunteer matching agencies may be able to assist counselor educators in finding appropriate opportunities. The recommendations in the next section are provided to further assist counselor educators who are interested in incorporating service-learning projects into their courses.

Recommendations for Counselor Educators

Work Closely With Institutional Organizations to Coordinate Service-Learning Projects

Many colleges and universities house organizations committed to arranging and facilitating service-learning activities (Crews, 2002). These organizations can assist counselor educators in identifying appropriate community sites, managing liability, and structuring the service-learning activity (Morton, 1996). National resources also exist to facilitate the development of service-learning projects. For example, the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2005) Web

site contains useful information for faculty. For the Hands to Love project, the instructor worked with the university community service office to address liability issues.

Prepare to Commit Significant Time and Energy to the Service-Learning Project

Service-learning programs involve sufficient time and organizational and energy demands for faculty (Long et al., 2001; Speck, 2001; Stadtlander, 2002). For example, the camp project required additional time on behalf of the instructor for meeting with camp staff, coordinating students' schedules, and monitoring the integrity of students' projects. Counselor educators can combine service-learning projects with research and scholarship activities to balance the competing time demands in higher education (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002).

Work Closely With Organization Leaders Throughout the Project

Faculty should maintain open communication with all parties involved in the service-learning project. These partnerships are crucial to the success of service-learning programs (Crews, 2002; Jacoby, 2003), and all parties should understand the scope of the project. For this camp project, regular contacts with organization leaders—by phone, e-mail, and in person—facilitated project implementation.

Allow Students Flexibility for Creativity and Individual Interests

In the camp project, students worked on projects that reflected their interests and experience. Students benefit when service-learning projects are organized around a central theme that is relevant to the course (Crews, 2002), and flexibility allows students to enhance their personal interest in the project.

Tie Practical Experience to Theory

The various strategies described earlier were used to tie the service-learning project to course content. Students should be encouraged to reflect continuously about the connections between the service-learning activity and course content (Eyler, 2002). Counselor educators can facilitate this reflection by tying course discussions, journal writing, and class activities to the service-learning project. Two students recommended on their feedback forms that more time be allotted for students to share their experiences with one another. Students can achieve vicarious learning experiences through peer dialogue.

Conduct Research Examining the Effectiveness of Service-Learning Methodologies in Counselor Education Courses

There is a need for increased research efforts that examine the extent to which service-learning projects enhance student learning

(Howard, 2003). Counselor education researchers should examine several important research questions, including the following: (a) Do counseling students who participate in course-related service-learning projects demonstrate more positive course outcomes (e.g., grades, knowledge of course content) compared with students who do not participate in such projects? (b) What is the personal impact (e.g., self-awareness, personal development) of service-learning projects for graduate counseling students? and (c) What impact do counseling-related service-learning projects have on the surrounding community?

Conclusion

Teaching family systems theory to introductory family counseling students presents a pedagogical challenge due to the conceptual differences between Western society's individualist epistemology and systemic thinking. Experiential educational pedagogy can enhance students' understanding of new concepts, such as family systems theory. In this article, we presented a rationale and model for using the experiential methodology of service-learning to enhance the training of introductory family counseling students. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of this approach. However, student feedback indicated that the service-learning project enhanced students' understanding of family systems theory.

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